

# Cameroon

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## Freedom of the Press

Although the preamble to Cameroon's 1996 constitution guarantees both freedom of expression and the press, journalists continued to face harassment and even jail time in 2013. Media outlets were also subjected to increasing scrutiny and restriction at the hands of the official regulatory body.

Libel and defamation remain both civil and criminal offenses, and a guilty verdict can mean a prison term of up to six months and/or a hefty fine. The burden of proof is on the defendant in libel cases, truth is not a defense, and public figures have additional "special protections" under the country's penal code. In March 2013, a criminal court in Douala, the nation's economic capital, sentenced Jean-Marie Tchatchouang, the editor of the weekly newspaper *Paroles*, to a two-month prison sentence and ordered him to pay two million CFA francs (\$4,000) to the owner of a Douala bus company. Tchatchouang had published several articles in *Paroles* in late 2010 detailing allegations of embezzlement and abusive labor practices at the bus company. Owner Jean Ernest Ngallè Bibéhé filed two criminal defamation lawsuits as a result. Tchatchouang had already been convicted of the first defamation complaint and received a six-month suspended sentence in 2011. Tchatchouang was released from prison in May. In an unrelated case, cartoonist Charles Fils Elangue was detained for six days in June pending his payment of a combined total of 2,656,000 CFA francs in damages, fines, and court costs after being found guilty of defamation and misinformation. The case was brought by the wife of the performer Njohreur for a 2011 article published on the now-defunct website Kaiwalai.com. The journalist was released after paying his bail, which amounted to 156,000 CFA francs (\$310).

Under the 1990 Social Communications law, there are nominal safeguards for independent print and audiovisual media. Under this law, the protection of journalists' sources is guaranteed; however, judges can compel journalists to reveal their sources in closed sessions. The 2010 Cybersecurity and Cybercriminality Law and a separate electronic communications law include measures that allow the immediate identification of internet users, while failing to include sufficient protections against abuse of power and invasion of privacy.

There is no specific Freedom of Information Act, but the law on social communication does confirm the "right to know." However, the government does not freely make documents or statistics available to the public or the media, and in fact doing so was made an offense under an October 2000 decree. Journalists who do not work for the state-owned newspaper or broadcaster are not accredited with the president or prime minister and do not accompany the president on official trips. In addition, President Paul Biya has never granted a domestic press conference.

The National Communications Council (CNC) was created by a presidential decree in 1991 and given powers extending from frequency allocation to arbitration on libel and defamation cases. In January 2012, the CNC was given sanction powers by presidential decree. The sanctions can range from warnings to bans of media outlets. The CNC exerted its power over the media with increasing frequency in 2013. In early April, the CNC, citing charges of ethics violations, indefinitely banned two television programs and three radio programs and suspended at least seven journalists. One of the two television shows, a monthly investigative program shown on the independent broadcaster Canal 2 International, raised questions about the possibility of ritual killings and organ trafficking after the mutilated corpses of several young girls were found in the capital Yaoundé. The second television show had sent a cameraman to shoot pictures of

a headless body found on the street. The CNC did not provide any specific reasons for banning the three radio programs except for a general charge of ethics violations. Later that month, local officials in the northwestern city of Bamenda, acting on orders from the minister of communications, shut down the studio of privately owned Foundation Radio after it broadcast an interview the authorities said “incited secessionism.” The CNC took an increasingly hard line in the run-up to Cameroon’s September 2013 parliamentary and local elections, imposing sanctions on 11 media organizations, including several newspapers and radio stations, including the permanent banning of one radio station. The CNC released an election coverage guide two weeks before voting that listed a host of sanctions that could be imposed for professional ethics violations. The publisher of the daily *Ouest-Littoral* was accused of “breaches of professional ethics” by the CNC head, Bishop Joseph Befe Ateba, after the newspaper wrote about a CNC ban on certain election topics.

Radio and television stations must be licensed, and the application process can be difficult and annual fees can be extremely expensive. Rural nonprofit radio stations are exempt from licensing fees, but barred from discussing politics. The first private broadcast licenses were granted in 2007, although the government allows many radio stations to operate without licenses. There is no independent body for self-regulation or to encourage a code of conduct. There are numerous associations for journalists, but they are often redundant and disorganized.

Much of the independent press does report critically about the government, but the threat of being prosecuted for libel leads many journalists, particularly within the broadcast media, to self-censor. Local authorities can seize publications that violate “public order.” Radio call-in shows and television debate programs in particular often feature strong criticism of the government and individual officials, but they operate under the constant possibility of repercussions for exceeding the limits of tolerated coverage. Reporters are also occasionally harassed or detained by security forces while attempting to cover sensitive stories. In June 2013, journalists from private outlets attempting to cover a story regarding a plane crash faced threats and obstruction from military officials, while their counterparts at the state broadcaster were allowed access, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. In previous years, some have faced ill treatment in detention. However, no serious physical attacks on members of the press were reported in 2013.

Cameroon has only one national newspaper, the *Cameroon Tribune*, which is state-owned and published in French and English with a daily circulation of about 20,000. There are several hundred newspapers and periodicals that operate sporadically throughout the country, though regular publication can be challenging due to cost and irregular enforcement of government regulations. Several of the dailies with the biggest circulation are openly critical of the government, although they are relatively expensive to buy, and do not circulate widely in rural areas. A single private newspaper distribution company has a near-monopoly in the industry, and is prohibitively expensive for smaller journals to use.

The state-owned broadcaster, Cameroon Radio and Television (CRTV), is widely viewed as favoring the government in its news and current-affairs reporting, including its election coverage. Even the owners of mainstream private broadcast media are reportedly under the government’s influence. Radio is the most important medium for most of the population, though most of the country’s privately owned stations, of which there are about 200, are in large urban areas. The state monopoly on television ended in 2001, and there are currently more than a dozen independent television stations. Television has a high level of influence in cities and towns, while more remote parts of the country can go weeks or months without a television or radio signal due to malfunctioning and outdated infrastructure. Foreign broadcasters are permitted to operate within Cameroon and are easily accessible to those who can afford the necessary equipment.

Internet usage was limited to approximately 6 percent of the population in 2013. There are generally no

official restrictions on access to the internet. New media are experiencing rapid growth in the country, particularly among the increasing number of people accessing the internet from their mobile telephones. However, users continue to endure slow connections and high fees at internet cafés. Cameroon is burdened with some of the highest bandwidth charges in West and Central Africa, despite its access to a submarine cable, SAT3, which links the region to Europe. Connection to the West Africa Cable System (WACS) was completed in 2012. The government extended its national optical fiber network to 6,000 kilometers (3,728 miles) in 2013, and has built about 200 telecenters with internet access.

Within the media, professional standards are highly uneven. Most journalists are not formally trained and there is a widespread lack of professionalism and ethical standards. Corruption is pervasive, due in large part to low wages for journalists.

## **2014 Scores**

### **Press Status**

Not Free

### **Press Freedom Score**

**(0 = best, 100 = worst)**

66

### **Legal Environment**

**(0 = best, 30 = worst)**

22

### **Political Environment**

**(0 = best, 40 = worst)**

23

### **Economic Environment**

**(0 = best, 30 = worst)**

21